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A Queer Lack of Success. Discourses on Same-sex Love and Neoliberalism in the Hindi Novel *Paṃkhvālī Nāv* by Paṃkaj Biṣṭ

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Abstract: *Paṃkhvālī nāv* (The winged boat) is a Hindi novel by Paṃkaj Biṣṭ that appeared in installments in *Haṃs* (2007) and was published as a book in 2009. The protagonist is a homosexual man, and the novel, defined by the author as a "sensitive human tragedy" (Tehelka, 05/12/2012), constructs a highly heterocentered discourse on queerness. Set in India just before the neoliberal turn, the story discusses sexual citizenship not only with reference to Indian society, but also in a global context.

In this article I analyze the text, problematizing the notion of gender and the emergence of a queer identity corresponding with the opening up of Indian economy to neoliberal capital. Politics of sexual identity in newly globalizing economies are linked to global discourses on HIV/AIDS prevention, sexual health, sexual rights, and reproductive health. Also the emergence of queer literature in India, and of *khuś* literature in the Hindi literary field, has to be investigated on the backdrop of global queer identity. Drawing on the 'anti-social turn' in Queer Studies, I propose an interpretation of queerness and failure as resistance to capitalism.

Keywords: Hindi literature, queer, heteronormativity, globalization, work

1 Hindi *khuś* literature and the novel *Paṃkhvālī nāv*

In 2009 the High Court of Delhi struck down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code which criminalized sexual activity "against the order of nature". Emboldened by legal recognition and a rapidly growing '*khuś* rights movement',[1] queer Indians

1 In Hindi various terms are used in order to talk about queer issues: *kuīr* is the transcription of the English 'queer', but it is not common; *khuś* is the Hindi term for 'happy, gay', and is

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started to speak out. The literary and publishing field as well has been affected by this vitality (Queer Ink, Yoda Press), literary festivals (Mumbai, Jaipur) started queer panels, and an effervescent Gay Pride was organized. Nevertheless, there seems to be a split between the '*kẖuś* movement' and '*kẖuś* writing': while the former is moving towards acceptance, the latter is still not visible and audible. With more authors choosing homosexual themes for their work, a same-sex story no longer remains taboo for Indian writers. But while queer fiction in English flourishes, there is relatively less noise about it in regional languages, even if recently the internet has been very active, and in January 2014 the popular webzine *Gaylaxy* started a Hindi edition, which has not only translations from English articles, but also original Hindi articles and poems (http://www.gaylaxymag.com/hindi/). I wrote elsewhere about Hindi queer literature and some issues related to it, as well as about the difficulty of finding literary works in Hindi written by queer authors who have 'come out'.[2] As the existing literature on queer writing in Hindi mostly analyzes texts that are decades old,[3] this is a contribution to the study of queer issues in Hindi fiction.

This article focuses on the novel *Paṃkhvālī nāv* (*The winged boat*) by Paṃkaj Biṣṭ,[4] published in installments in *Haṃs* in 2007 and subsequently appeared in a book form in 2009. This literary work is interesting because it was written before the repealing of Section 377; moreover, the story is set in a time immediately preceding the neoliberal turn in Indian economy, prompting some thoughts about

generally used by queer people to describe themselves. The most common term in essays and published material is *samlaiṃgik*, of the same sex. Dutoya (2016) gives a thorough discussion on the academic and activist discourse on queerness in the Indian context.

2 Consolaro 2011, 300–308; Consolaro 2014a.

3 Thadani 1996; Sukthankar 1999; Sharma 2006; Vanita/Kidwai 2000; Cossio 2003.

4 Born on February 20, 1946 in Mumbai, Paṃkaj Biṣṭ is a socially active intellectual who has been engaged in several intense debates. After working for over thirty years in different positions with Ministry of Information – including editing of magazines such as *Akāśvāṇi* and *Ājkal* – he took early retirement in 1999 in order to devote himself to independent writing and publishing. Since then he is involved in publishing and editing the thought provoking Hindi monthly *Samayāṃtar* ('Time-lapse', http://www.samayantar.com), a 'little magazine' – its first avatar was in the 70s and it was a powerful voice of dissent during the Emergency – entirely devoted to contemporary issues concerned with radical social and political engagements. This magazine has several readers and also a few enemies, as it relentlessly reports on irregularities and malpractices in various institutions meant to promote Hindi language and literature, highlighting discussion on important but neglected issues in Hindi media, and translating serious analysis published elsewhere in English. He is a renowned fiction writer, having published two other novels (*Lekin darvāzā*, 1982 and *Us ciṛiyā kā nām*, 1989) and many short stories collections (among which *Aṃdhere se* with Asġar Vajāhat, 1976; *Pandrah jamā paccīs*, 1980; *Bacce gavāh nahīṃ ho sakte?*, 1985; *Golū aur Bholū*, 1994).

globalization and queerness with reference to India. Paṃkaj Biṣṭ is apparently animated by concern and empathy towards the protagonist of this fiction. He addresses the issue of how in India *kẖuś* sex is easier to find than *kẖuś* love, because sex needs only short time privacy, while love – meant as a stable socially recognized relation – needs that the partners deal with family and society. In the end, though, the text reflects the widespread society's attitude to homosexuality, that considers it as a disease to be cured, an abnormality to set right.

Paṃkhvālī nāv introduces the character of an advertisement painter named Vikram Siṃh telling the story of Anupam Kumār, a creative director who, in the second half of the 1980s, joins "Image India", the advertising company based in Delhi where Vikram too works. The structure of the novel is quite conventional: opening and closing chapters build a frame – "13 years later" Vikram visits Anupam's mother in an old house in Dehradun – and in between a long flashback recalls some events in the life of Anupam. Although several decades of research and clinical experience have led mainstream medical and mental health organizations to conclude that lesbian, gay, transgender and bisexual orientations represent normal forms of human experience, and that LGBT relationships are normal forms of human bonding, the novel is informed by an unflinching heteronormativity. According to a widespread stereotype, Anupam is portrayed as a disturbed person: "Eternal instability, restlessness, and scandal were constantly following Anupam"[5]. He is represented as a very talented person: he is very clever, speaks very good Hindi and English, is a gifted poet with published poems, he is technologically advanced – which at that time was not very common. But he is also described as an instable person, stubborn, individualistic, unable to cooperate and collaborate with other people, almost violent, and introverted: "A strange alertness prevented him to open up", "he was constantly disquiet like a radar antenna searching out something" [15], "he would never speak out clearly his ideas and projects, but he would rather put them on in bits and pieces, like a chess player, so that people working with him could not guess until the end which direction he was taking the game and how it would end" [16]. Last but not least, he behaves in a "European" way. His salary is very high, but he cannot save money and even gets into debts because of some dubious relations he entertains with drug addicts and other dodgy people; he keeps on changing jobs as he is a liar, constantly quarrels with his colleagues and is surrounded by bad reputation. His acquaintances are mostly people living at the fringes of respectability, moving in a space constructed as deviant, somewhat dirty, often un-Indian, not respectable, repugnant, unnatural, and pathological. His whole

5 Biṣṭ 2009: 100; henceforth references to page numbers of the novel are given in square brackets; all translation from Hindi are mine.

experience is a sum of stereotypes about queer people: for instance, that the relationships of lesbians and gay men are dysfunctional, unhappy and unstable, and that the goals and values of queer couples are different from those of heterosexual couples. The final judgment on Anupam is as follows:

> [Anupam] was victim of this personality disorder: if this was not perversion, he had somehow, in some other way strayed from the path, and he was now oppressed by this, but was not ready to admit it. [87]

The explanation of the insurgence of queer orientation in the protagonist is linked to a traumatic experience. Endorsing the Freudian explanation of homosexuality, Vikram reads Anupam's relation to women as a reaction to his mother's dominating behavior: after the death of his father he grew up with a possessive mother and sister, who were very protective. Maybe his attraction to men and the idealization of women was due to this lack of masculine figure in his childhood. The text cursorily explains that also lesbians behave like that because of their husbands' impotency [74–75]. But the main cause is the fact that Anupam experienced gang rape in adolescence. The narrative is that in 1974, while he studies in college, he is kidnapped and raped by a group of youngsters lead by his childhood friend who becomes his lover/master. He has few memories of the event, apart from pain and shame, but he is broken. Anupam survives an attempted suicide, and in what Freud would define as traumatic fixation, since then he starts a series of sexual relations with lovers whose nicknames – blind, big-bellied, dwarf, Vibhīṣaṇ, Tuglak, Nādirśāh, Hitler – show both his victimized role, and a despising feeling.

On the contrary, the narrator is a self-contented champion of conformity to social patriarchal norms. He is married with children: a boy and a girl, both significantly unnamed, in the "ham do hamāre do" style. He spends his evenings and nights going out and drinking with male friends, including the gay one, while his wife Sumitrā happily waits for him within the domestic walls and dutifully gets worried if he is late. She is a housewife, characterized by a "motherly, uterine (she is the second sister of three brothers) and extremely vehement altruistic nature", that immediately gets activated when she gets to know about this strange and lonely friend of Vikram [37]. The confinement of the wife into the protected household space reflects the fact that in India urban public spaces are symbolically and literally taken over by men, while women occupy a disproportionately smaller percentage of public space in cities even though they comprise approximately fifty percent of the population.[6] No wonder

6 Phadke et al. 2011.

Vikram, an icon of middle-class heteronormativity, "spontaneously" and "naturally" exhibits his masculinity whenever a woman is around. He is even gratified when he finds out that Anupam is in love with him, but rejects any behavior that might endanger his status of righteous man, upholder of the straight patriarchal order, and he expresses disgust when Anupam makes a pass at him [57–58].

Vikram is convinced that sex is only justified within the wedded couple, and that in any case its natural goal is reproduction. Anything else is dangerous and/or perverted. Interestingly enough, he describes himself as not caring about his body, but is very pleased to repeatedly stress how his well-built and tall body is better looking than others, especially the bodies of gay men, who on the contrary appear to him as being in love with their body. In a passage the narrator happens to meet Anupam's former lover, and immediately notes with masculine pride that he is not very good looking, comparing the man's physical aspect to his own [97]. His feeling of physical and moral superiority is well exemplified also by the passage telling his encounters with Śarmiṣṭhā. This is an extremely beautiful woman with whom Anupam has a complex relation, having performed with her an "experiment", a sort of medical test that had proved his inability to coition, and that is described by the narrator as a "failure". When they first meet, Vikram starts flirting with her, exhibiting his straight and masculine nature. Later, commenting on that, he adds:

> Actually, with Śarmiṣṭhā I had pushed it a little too far. This is not my usual behavior, I don't know why I did it, maybe it was in order to show to Anupam my real character and inclination. A sort of defense mechanism, in fact I was constantly agitated and alert when I was with him. [70]

Śarmiṣṭhā, who is not confirming to the role prescribed by heteronormativity, is herself a "failure": she is adulterous, constantly in search of thrill, willing to have a triangle relation with Anupam and her husband, ready to have an affair with Vikram. This is outrageous for the narrator, who strongly stigmatizes this behavior. Anupam's and Śarmiṣṭhā's sexual behavior confirm the public discourse about homosexuals – as well as about the inherent aptitude of women – constructed as driven by insatiable desire, aspiring to uninterrupted sex. The connection between female prostitutes (the public woman as opposed to the respectable wife) and male homosexuals reveals also a fantasy of uncontrolled female sexuality as intrinsically diseased: any kind of sexuality that is not aimed at legitimate reproduction is contrary to 'civilized' sexual morality. This brings about fantasies connected with sexual pleasure, and about sex as "anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving"[7]. Sticking to a Freudian

7 Bersani 2010: 22.

interpretation, unrepressed sexuality might destroy civilization. Heterosexual genital monogamy and reproductive sex constitute a sexual hygiene, protecting one from male fantasies about women's multiple orgasms and promiscuous sexuality. A sexual desire of men for men necessarily implies a socially determined and socially pervasive definition of what it means to be a man. Macho masculinity is constructed as the righteous watchman of civilization and power, insofar as "to be penetrated is to abdicate power"[8].

Vikram is the only person in the office who enters into a friendly relation with Anupam, as the latter is able to turn everybody into his own enemy. He listens to Anupam's reasoning about the need to get out of the closet, to discuss and reject fixed gender roles, to reformulate notions of motherhood and sexuality. The novel is replete with the 'postmodern' repertoire of arguments about homosexuality, yet the final stance is that there is no place for people like Anupam in this society. This is another pivotal aspect of the novel, that is–interestingly enough–also one of the bulwarks of the conservative argument on the topic in India. Queer orientation and behavior are linked to Western influence, as if they were an imported phenomenon connected to the exposure to an external culture. Anupam is fond of music and poetry, and many a passage contains enumerations about writers, singers, and painters, creating a sort of queer literary and musical canon for the Indian gay man.[9] The narrator takes great care to construct himself as naively unaware of the queer implications of this canon. He is a "normal", straight, sound Indian young man, who can barely speak basic English, who ignores who Oscar Wilde was, and is frightened to find out what "other kind of love" caught David, Jonathan, Plato, Michelangelo and Shakespeare. He likes the good old *filmī* songs–he specifies "up to the 70s", and cannot understand classical, but enjoys *ġazal*-s.

As a matter of fact, the relation between both male protagonists of the novel is not friendship: Anupam is always portrayed in a minority situation, while Vikram plays the role of the elder brother, patronizing the subaltern younger man. Anupam is prey of a *cupio dissolvi* impulse and he seems doomed to a bad end. In fact, he will mysteriously die in Goa–another icon of postmodern and

8 Bersani 2010: 19.

9 Classic paperbacks: Borges, Marquez, Italino Calvino (sic!), Losa (sic!), Rushdie, Umberto Eco, plus some romantic and thriller. Biographies of Chaplin, Neruda, Isadora Duncan, a collection of letters by Oscar Wilde, and some classic poetry collections by Rimbaud, Rilke, Lorca, Muktibodh, Firaq and Galib. Anupam quotes *Two Loves* by Lord Alfred Douglas, the famous *ġazal* by Iqbal containing a distich mentioning the young lover of Mahmud Ghaznavi; his flat exhibits paintings by Bhupen Khakkar, but also Michelangelo's famous naked statue David. He listens almost compulsively to cassettes by Bach, Mozart, Chopin, and Zubin Mehta's concerts; besides Bob Dylan, he is a particular fan of Freddy Mercury.

western lifestyle, possibly killed by some lover. As for Vikram, he distances himself from Anupam in the effort to maintain his good reputation, and when Anupam moves abroad their relation becomes purely nominal. Notwithstanding this, there is an episode [98–99] that shows an emotional tie between both men, when Vikram bids farewell to Anupam at the airport: there is a strong embrace, and suddenly the narrator runs away, hides himself in the toilet and bursts into tears, crying for a long time.

2 Work and neoliberal turn

Paṃkhvālī nāv's characters are colleagues in a Hindi advertising agency in the second half of the 1980s. While Vikram has been working there for some time, Anupam is hired in 1986 [18]. India Image is the fictive name of the advertising company where they work, a name that evokes an eponym program of NIC with an objective to facilitate the establishment of a firm presence of Indian Government entities on the World Wide Web initiated in the year 1996. This chronological setting suggests the proximity to the neoliberal turn in India, focusing on a time prior to the IT boom that took shape at the beginning of the 1990s.

The general discourse about India's economic growth is that it started with the 1991 liberalization. Yet, as many analysts have pointed out, the growth record reveals that the momentum of India's growth rate precedes the 1991 turn by a full decade.[10] This was the decade in which India's economy made a break through, moving beyond the 'Hindu growth rate' to a more rapidly growing economy. The government's realignment with the organized private sector and big capital was not a market-oriented policy, implying trade liberalization (which did not take place until the 1990s), but rather a set of pro-business policies, focusing on raising the profitability of the established industrial and commercial establishments, easing restrictions on capacity expansion for incumbents, removing price controls, and reducing corporate taxes. Therefore, it can be stated that already in the 1980s, with the establishment of the business culture, a capitalist identity had started to become the only identity deemed legitimate.

The divide between Anupam and Vikram is not only marked by their different sexual preferences or lifestyles. Anupam and Vikram are examples of the

10 Byres 1997, DeLong 2003; Ghosh 2005; Chandrasekhar/Ghosh 2006; Kohli 2006; Sen 2007; Adduci 2009, 32–39.

Indian middle classes. They are very different from the identity formation of the 'new young urban class' in India, a new class – or, it can be argued, a class fragment – of young professionals that is definitely a product of liberalization; this new phenomenon is very different from the generic Indian middle class, being both demographically young and urban in location, self-consciously cosmopolitan in orientation. The generic 'middle class' about which researchers on modern India predicate that it is the explanation of the stability of 'Indian democracy' or the backbone of emerging markets does not coincide with this 'new class', a transnational formation whose class habitus and taste are definitely different from the previously existing ones.[11]

Already by the late 1970s significant numbers of Indians settled overseas were achieving modest prosperity: they would come home for visits and send money home to help their families. These processes influenced not only English-speaking urbanites; they spread into small towns and villages. In short, the money and the demand existed, but awareness of this fact came slowly to manufacturers, marketing people and politicians. It was between the advent of Rajiv Gandhi in 1985 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 that the face of Indian economic policies changed: not only imports and rules of entry for foreign firms into the Indian market were liberalized, but also the salaries of government employees were more than doubled. Rajiv Gandhi had realized that the middle class had grown so rapidly in numbers that it was now a political force: therefore, it made political sense to satisfy the aspirations of this class, even at the risk of being portrayed as anti-poor.

Between 1976 and 1994 the Indian advertising industry grew by something like twenty-five times in simple rupee terms.[12] Advertisements were crucial in the shaping of a new notion of modernity, abandoning the Nehruvian developmentalist aesthetic, blending Western modernity and consumerism into

11 'Class' is a term often used without definition as a means of assessing market potential. The criteria for defining these classes is rarely given. A lot of attention is given to the size of the middle classes, as they are seen to be the major target market for expansion. The estimated size of these middle classes differs widely: some claim that the India middle classes had increased 400% in the years from 1970–1995 to 100 million people or 12% of the population (MacDonald et al. 1995), others estimated the middle class at 150 million in 1996 (Pashupati/Sengupta 1996); according to a Report of the McKinsey Global Institute the Indian middle class will amount to 583 million people by 2025 (Ablett et al. 2007: 13). Large-scale data on workforce characteristics in India are almost absent, and due to the practical difficulty in accessing such data, I have relied on general studies on advertisement, media, and globalization in India, even if their main focus tends to be on the 1990s and later period.

12 Mazzarella 2003.

Indian tradition.[13] Consumerism remained somewhat morally ambivalent, but Western modernity was successfully integrated into the frame of Indianness. Middle-class values simultaneously endorsed and challenged caste norms, gendered identities (both feminine and masculine) and the symbolic role of the family against the prioritization of material cultures, all framed around a discourse of morality and respectability.[14] The discourse about what was defined as the "emerging great Indian middle class" (Varma 1999) was used as a rhetorical device to attract investors, and India's economic orientation shifted from industrial development to consumer spending, reinforcing the perception of India as an emerging market.[15]

At the same time, the figure of the cosmopolitan Indian emerged. Well-travelled Indian men (more rarely women), connected to the global world, were increasingly depicted in advertisements and films.[16] NRIs gained financial and political importance both in their host countries and in their home country, eager to be recognized on the international stage as an emerging power. Diasporic citizens, an increasingly visible presence in the cultural landscape of India, became the locus of expectations and hopes: NRI intellectuals, artists, business people became the mediators of authentic India for 'the West' and took an active part in the creation of a new aesthete, appealing for an increasingly cosmopolitan young urban professional class in India. The relative ease with which liberalization was accepted, and the concomitant change in public opinion and culture, signals the construction of a new hegemony in India, the one by this 'new middle class'.

The neoliberal turn in India has had a very strong impact on the Anglophone population, which tends to coincide with the urban affluent middle class. But the lower middle class too, that is generally less cosmopolitan and less anglicized, has been affected by the rise in consumerism and the change of lifestyle. This is the milieu of *Paṃkhvālī nāv*'s narrator, as well as of other protagonists of Hindi fiction focusing on work and human relations in work places. For example, as far as I know, one of the first Hindi novels set in the world of advertisement is Citrā Mudgal's *Ek zamīn apnī* (A land of one's own), published in 1990. The same set of values seem to inform also later Hindi fiction:

13 Jeffrey 1997.

14 van Wessel 2004; Säävälä 2012; Mankekar 1999; Consolaro 2010.

15 It is important to point out that the discourse on Indian middle class has mainly portrayed a homogenous, pan-Indian middle-class identity, conceptualizing the resulting cultural configuration as a moral dichotomy of being simultaneously modern and traditional and ignoring other more relevant phenomena, such as the vernacularization of the new middle class/classes (Pandey 2009; Donner 2011).

16 Mishra 2009; Deshpande 2005; Consolaro 2014b; Cayla 2002.

for example, the Hindi novel *Śuddhipatr* by Nīlākṣī Siṃḥ, published in 2008, emphasizes self-expression, creativity, integrity, and simple success vs. competition and individual assertion.[17]

The difficulties posed by the adaptation to a capitalist lifestyle are at the root of the story introduced in *Paṃkhvālī nāv*. Both Anupam and Vikram work in an advertising company. Most of the large Indian advertising agencies are located in Bombay, but the novel is set in Delhi, a city that, though being the capital of the Indian Union, has always been more a center of political and administrative power than a business center. This immediately sets the story in a somewhat less cosmopolitan and more conservative milieu. Within the company, Anupam and Vikram have different roles. They are both creative, which means that they belong to the engine of the advertising agency. Vikram is an artist: his primary function is to lay out ads in such a way that it will attract the attention of the target market and communicate effectively the intended message. In the 1980s and 1990s the main visual characteristics of outdoor advertising were the use of illustration or text only, with very little photography used except for technical products such as cars. Lifestyle advertising featuring people located in environments was rare, though people were often used in a decorative way. Therefore, the role of artists in an advertising agency was particularly relevant in the Indian context.

Anupam is a copywriter, whose function is to transcribe the idea and imagination into word and language which can suitably be converted into an art work. At the Image India company, though, Anupam is the Creative Director, the figure whom everyone within creative services reports to. It is his role to steer the creative product, making sure it is on brand, on brief and on time. In the context of the novel, Anupam is the leader, but he cannot manage his team successfully. According to some studies, the most effective leadership style in India is the so-called NT model, a combination of nurturing (caring) and task-oriented behaviors.[18] This integrative model recognizes leaders within the team in different capacities, rather than above them. Leaders and team members can only be defined in light of one another. A team member is not a part, but is the whole. Anupam, though, is very individualistic, and he imposes his ideas and will to the whole staff, creating a very negative working environment. He seems unable to work with other people even when he needs them, and he behaves as a boss, not as a leader. In one word, his public behavior is as anticommunal and antiegalitarian as his sexual behavior.

17 Orsini 2012.

18 Sinha 1994.

Everybody complains about Anupam's behavior, and his way of dealing with the colleagues is perceived as a consequence of his westernization and gay orientation. At Image India the very people who are engaged in changing the consumer profile have an ambivalent behavior towards the consumerist way of life. The ad campaign that in the novel first reveals Anupam as a talented advertiser is the launch of new products for a biscuit company, reflecting the fact that the Indian consumer profile remains needs driven, and, compared to Europe or the USA, a higher proportion of disposable income even amongst the affluent is spent on basic needs rather than luxury goods.

3 Capitalism, reproductive normativity, and respectability

The clash between a sober 'traditional' lifestyle, and a more consumerist and glam-oriented one seems to be reflected in the different life style of Anupam and Vikram. The former has no private motorbike, but this is due to his fear of having an accident, not to financial inability. He lives on his own on the second floor in a three/four storied building in Rajendra Nagar, in Central Delhi. This area came up as a refugee colony during the years after the Partition, and in the 1970s and 1980s was developed as a planned middle and upper middle class residential built-up area. He lives in a loft, described as a "large one room apartment", so large that it occupies almost the whole second floor. The furniture is eccentric, impractical and everything looks like a "show piece": there is only one folding chair, but it is an exquisite traditional carved and engraved piece from Saharanpur [26]. A large mattress, sparkling white, is spread on both sides of the room, with cushions and pillows to lean on. There are two lamps, but the light is very dimmed, so that everything is blurred and unclear. In the shadow, forms can be perceived only gradually and slowly, like pictures printed on chemically treated paper from photo negatives developed from a roll of film. There are two racks of books, a table with a tablelamp; newspapers and magazines are piled in a corner; there is a pile of audio cassettes and another rack is full of VHS cassettes. In contrast to this modern technological setting, a phonograph with a shining brass loudspeaker showed off in the middle of numerous records. The walls exhibit two large paintings, reproductions of works by Bhupen Khakkar and Michelangelo.

Vikram lives in South West Delhi, an area that in the late 1980s became a residential area for an affluent middle class. Vikram's house is nondescript and literally has no representation in the novel: everything in Vikram's private life is

so 'normal' that it does not require explanation. Moreover, apart from a sporadic invitation to dinner at Vikram's house, Anupam and Vikram meet at work, at Anupam's house, or in public spaces. Vikram's domestic life is like a background to his public life, it is taken for granted and does not deserve narration. We can read this as the reinforcement of the fact that the heterosexual family is the norm – an invisible norm, while any alternative to it is the 'queer'.

Here comes the clash between queerness and heteroreproductive normativity. In his pioneering study, John D'Emilio discusses the relation between capitalism and queerness, describing how capitalism created material conditions for the expression of gay identity and politics: the advent of industrial capitalism led to the separation of sex from procreation and allowed the concept of 'sexual identity' as defined by one's sexual desires to flourish.[19] However, capitalism needs procreation: capital praises families in order to reproduce the next generation of workers. By encouraging the traditional household not only capitalism is contradictory but it also rejects homosexuals given that they do not procreate. In doing so capital is isolating homosexuals and single women who choose to live outside the 'normal' family structure. Single women and homosexuals have a relationship of mutual dependence to capital, insofar as individuals are essential for increasing capital, and this can ultimately discontinue families. In today's global discourse on queerness, gay and lesbian identities have become codified and managed through the workings of capitalism. The market has limited queer politics by fostering self and community identification via consumption, and during the 1990s advertising has allowed global lesbians and gays to imagine themselves, and urged them to implicate themselves, within capitalism. Consumption has allowed them to be gay by virtue of buying gay, without ever needing to have homosexual sex or even express homosexual desire.[20] This perpetuates the split between public appearance and private behavior: capital needs to accept only those that can procreate and exist in a nuclear family, and to perpetuate heteronormativity and homophobia.

Casting racialized non-normative sexualities as signs of disorder and social chaos within an otherwise stable social system is not only an exclusive feature of liberal capitalism: the normative temporal and spatial frames of historical materialism in Marxist theory as well proposes a definition of civilization according to which they are anterior, backward, un-civilized, set against the stability of heteronormative models of time and transformation. Capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and racist economies tend to be represented as totalizing

19 D'Emilio 1983: 100–113.

20 Sender 2004; Chasin 2000.

and inevitable, as uninterrupted and nonporous, leaving a very limited possibility to imagine an alternative system (Gibson-Graham 1996).

In the patriarchal Indian system heteronormativity is a must, like in the capitalistic structure (Kole 2007; Bhaskaran 2004; Dutta 2013; Consolaro 2014a): the invisibilization of sexual behaviors helps preserve the fiction of reproductive sex only within marriage, and complete absence of sex outside. It helps reinstate the reproductive logic of sex. And, most importantly, by rejecting public discourse on the subject it sweeps the possibility of all sexual acts and behaviors outside the bounds of marriage. It further helps in inculcating a sense of superiority vis-à-vis all traditions that are expressive of sexual diversities, which are seen as dirty and perverted. This is a very delicately balanced psychological arrangement, which is overturned by males who participate as the penetrated sexual partner in the sexual act: they challenge all the accepted and ingrained notions, and therefore they are punished. The punishment takes the form of demasculinization, dehumanization and deprivation of their various rights.

In general, marriage is not seen as companionate and egalitarian: it is a social, cultural and religious necessity, a central issue within people's lives and a mainstay of family and community life. Marital status marks the achievement of adulthood, social responsibility and personhood. The wife is seen as the bearer and mother of his children, not as a friend and lover. Marriage is considered a socially and religiously compulsory duty towards maintaining family and community bonds, and sex with one's wife as a means to have children. Nevertheless, because of the dominant male ideology and male social spaces, a male should be seen spending more times with other males, otherwise he would be seen as being weak and perhaps 'womanly'.

Paṃkhvālī nāv shows how much normative heterosexuality is dependent on the production of non-normative subjects. 'Normal' characters such as Vikram are contrasted to a kind of freakish excess, which is subsequently associated with too much freedom: the predatory Śarmiśṭhā and the childish Anupam are cast as sexually depraved, fetishistically phallic, and in the end physically repugnant, notwithstanding their apparent beauty. Their semi-sinister romantic and personal narrative implies that change can mean loss of tradition, family, history.

4 Resisting respectability and success

The contemporary global queer liberation discourse is a movement for social justice that seeks to transform the fundamental institutions of society, such as

gender and family. The public recognition of gay people and relationships is contingent upon their acquiring a respectable social identity that is actually constituted by public performances of respectability and by privately queer practices. The crucial distinction lies between respectability – the state or quality of being proper, correct, and socially acceptable – and respect – due regard for the feelings, wishes, or rights of others (Joshi 2012; Walker 2000). Respect connotes acceptance of difference; respectability connotes acceptance of the norm. Respectability is a system of hierarchy grounded on distinctions between the respectable and the degenerate. Respectability – not respect – has characterized legal recognition of same-sex relationships.

In *Paṃkhvālī nāv* Anupam's character is particularly problematic to Vikram insofar as he demands respect over respectability. "Respectable queerness" would imply acquiring a respectable social identity by public performances of respectability and by privately queer practices. Respectability may be bestowed upon those who are deemed worthy of it, for example, by reaching the heights of professional success or getting married. Marriage is not an option for queer people like Anupam, even if he tries, at least once, to build up a stable, conjugal type of relation. He might try to achieve respectability at least through economic success: by virtue of a relatively privileged social standing, he may be suitably positioned to promote greater acceptance for LGBT causes. Respectability may thus appear to be a means to disrupt hierarchies and inequalities. Yet, Anupam refuses to repress or hide aspects of his queer self that are incompatible with being respectable: he wants respect over respectability, and this makes his history of difference a very radical one. Because sexuality is constructed as a necessarily secretive and private aspect of identity that has no place within a respectable public sphere, queer sexuality becomes further embedded into the private sphere. The quest for respectability does not mean that queer desire is transformed into the desire for recognition; rather, the desire itself is split into two parts, and each constituent desire put into its proper place: publicly respectable and privately queer. Thus, even as a gay person may 'come out' in the public world, aspects of his sexual identities remain hanging like skeletons in his closet.

It is interesting to add that such repression is not only true for gay/lesbian/queer respectability: Śarmiṣṭhā – a straight, even over-sexualized woman – is also resisting the demands to become respectable, even if these may be different from demands imposed on homosexuals, and they may also be experienced differently. In this contradictory relationship, public and private expressions of queerness are rendered more difficult by public recognition of queer people and relationships that is predicated upon their being respectable. Correspondingly, public recognition is always threatened by practices of queerness that may be

deemed not to be respectable. This paradoxical paradigm is liable to engender 'double consciousness,' a dissonance between one's public and private selves.[21]

The resistance to heteronormativity in Anupam is linked to a *cupio dissolvi*, being a sort of literary exemplification of Lee Edelman's statement that "the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (Edelman 2004: 9). This character in the novel seems to prove that "queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one" (Edelman 2004: 17). In Vikram's perception – the heteronormative point of view – Anupam's sterile and narcissistic enjoyments, inherently destructive of meaning, are not only reproachable from a moral point of view, but they are eventually responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself. Anupam stands opposed to the characteristically 'human' traits that conduce to sociality: compassion, identification, love of one's neighbor as oneself. Anupam's rejection of the spiritualization of sexuality through marriage is a denial of teleology and reproductive futurism.

In a heteronormative, capitalist view, Anupam's inability to combine reproductive maturity with wealth accumulation is synonymous for failure: even if he is potentially a very talented man, he is doomed to be unsuccessful, and eventually to death. In a structure where marriage and child are sacralized, the sacrifice of the queer becomes necessary in order to guarantee the future. Drawing on Judith/Jack Halberstam's *The queer art of failure*[22], I propose an alternative, queer reading of Anupam's failure. Failure is linked to disappointment, disillusionment, despair, and other negative feelings; nonetheless, it has also a positive function, if one uses these negative feelings to question the deadly positivity of contemporary life, exposing the contradictions of a society obsessed with meaningless competition. Queers are related to failure in terms of a utopian "rejection of pragmatism," on the one hand, and an equally utopian refusal of social norms on the other.[23] Yet, insofar as success is always measured by male standards, gender failure may mean being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, which can offer unforeseen satisfactions, unimaginable by those who adhere to the patriarchal rule.

Anupam's insistence in a queer lifestyle that is doomed to failure can be interpreted as a resistance to the liberal realm where pursuit of happiness is not only desirable, but mandatory, and where formulations of self as active, voluntaristic, choosing, propulsive, dominate the political sphere. His (sexual)

21 Fanon 2008.

22 Halberstam 2011.

23 Muñoz 2010.

passivity may signal another kind of refusal: the refusal quite simply to be. Anupam does not keep in contact with his mother, who obviously represents the relation to the past. She is also the one who, in her senile delusion, forges a future for him, writing fake letters and hallucinating a heterosexual happy ending where he got married to none the less than Śarmiṣṭhā [121–127]. His forgetting about family ties is a form of resistance to the impulse to retrace a definitive past and map a prescriptive future. Anupam in fact encourages us to rest a while in the weird temporal space of the lost, the ephemeral, and the forgetful.

Anupam is constructed as a perennial child: even when he gets over forty his physical aspect is boyish [122], and his behavior is not more mature. If adulthood equals to heterosexual parenting, then queer culture is synonymous with refusal of adulthood, with its emphasis on repetition, horizontality, immaturity, all notions that have been widely discussed in queer studies.[24] Adults are those who demand narratives of sentiment, progress, and closure; children have unsentimental, amoral, and anti-teleological narrative desires. Queer relations resist a developmental model of substitution: they are a sort of anti-development, and insist on "sideways" relations growing along parallel lines rather than up- and onward.[25] Anupam's queerness is somehow operating against the logics of succession, progress, development, and tradition suitable to hetero-familial development. He is accused of not being serious enough towards his duties both as a male, and as a worker. Yet, seriousness and rigor are often code words for disciplinary correctness: sustaining epistemological homeostasis, they allow a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but erase visionary insights or flights of fancy.

Anupam's goal is to lose one's way, and indeed to be prepared to lose more than one's way: he does not accept the order of things nor does he completely internalize them, but he treads on a path of anarchic freedom and creativity, ready to detour and get lost. Anupam disconnects the process of generation from the force of historical process: he seeks to break the connection that links change and progress to the supposedly organic and immutable forms of family and inheritance. The concept of family, whether in hetero or same-sex contexts, tends to introduce normative understandings of time and transmission, insofar as the family matrix, with its emphasis on lineage, inheritance, and generation, does tend to cast temporal flux in terms of either seamless continuity or total rupture.

24 Butler 1990; Halberstam 2011; Muñoz 2010.

25 Stockton 2009.

Anupam's undisciplined knowledge introduces modes of thinking that ally not with rigor and order, but with inspiration and unpredictability: they require new rationales for knowledge production, different aesthetic standards for ordering or disordering space, other modes of political engagement than those conjured by the liberal imagination. He is an illegible item in a reproduction and profit oriented society: in James Scott's words, "large-scale capitalism is just as much an agency of homogenization, uniformity, grids, and heroic simplification as the state is, with the difference being that, for capitalists, simplification must pay" (Scott 1999: 8).

5 Failing, resisting

The prevalent trend in queer scholarship is to focus on globalized rights-based discourses and social movements. Yet, scholars like Heather Love or Judith/Jack Halberstam[26] argue for a contradictory archive embracing the incoherent, the lonely, the defeated, and the melancholic formulations of selfhood filled with loss and longing, abjection and ugliness, as well as love, intimacy, and survival. The negative potential of the queer introduces also the possibility of rethinking the meaning of the political through queerness. Interpreting queerness and failure as signs of resistance makes sense also if we place these notions in the context of feminist critiques of happiness. Happiness is used to justify social norms as social goods: if happiness is understood as what is good, a social good is what causes happiness.[27] To be willing to go against a social order, which is protected as a moral order – a happiness order – is to be willing to experience and cause unhappiness. Heteronormative "common sense" – in the Gramscian usage, as a notion depending on the production of norms – leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. The critique of dominant forms of common sense is also a critique of norms: queer modes of commonsense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, non-reproductive life styles, negativity, and critique. The historical gay identity has been associated with homosexual love and loss, love's failures and impossibilities (as well as, of course, wild hopes for its future). Even if the successive waves of liberation have often diminished or dismissed this aspect, the art of losing can be interpreted as a particularly queer art, "a politics forged in the image of exile, of refusal, even of failure"[28].

26 Love 2007; Halberstam 2011.
27 Ahmed 2010.
28 Love 2007: 71.

Failure, of course, goes hand in hand with modern capitalism. As Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, the idea of modernity, with its suggestions of progress, rationality, and technological advance, is intimately bound up with backwardness.[29] The association of progress and regress is a function not only of the failure of so many of modernity's key projects but also of the reliance of the concept of modernity on excluded, denigrated, or superseded others. A market economy must have winners and losers, gamblers and risk takers, con men and dupes; capitalism requires that everyone live in a system that equates success with profit and links failure to the inability to accumulate wealth even as profit for some means certain losses for others.[30] Yet, the story of losers has apparently no records, it is a hidden history, that cannot be told in the culture of optimism of the winners. Building on this, Judith/Jack Halberstam interprets failure as a tale of anticapitalist, queer struggle: it is a "narrative about anticolonial struggle, the refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming"[31]. Apparently, the pro-business switch that took place in the 1980s in India had the political economy merit of avoiding the creation of 'losers'.[32] But those who did not embrace the capitalist mantra of production/reproduction were bound to fail.

Anupam, the queer protagonist of *Paṃkhvālī nāv*, has the potentialities to be a successful person: he is creative, intelligent, has a good family background. Yet, contrary to all the expectations, he fails, and apparently the reason for this is his queerness. Even if inaction, passivity, and lack of resistance are generally perceived as faults in a setting that approaches life with a sense of perpetual ambition, it is possible to analyze his refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline as a form of critique, and to re-categorized them as a practice of stalling the business of the dominant.

We can interpret Vikram and Anupam as literary representatives of the pro-business shift, with Vikram embodying the connections between production and reproduction, while Anupam being a misfit of capitalism, an outsider to the logic of achievement, fulfillment, and success(ion) where heterosexuality is rooted in, labelled a born loser. As Guy Hocquenghem notes, "capitalism turns its homosexuals into failed normal people, just as it turns its working class into an imitation of the middle class"[33]. In the novel, the character of Anupam is constructed according to the capitalist logic, whereby the homosexual is perceived as inauthentic and unreal: Anupam is incapable of proper love – the

29 Chakrabarty 2002: xix.
30 Sandage 2005.
31 Halberstam 2011: 88.
32 Rodrik/Subramanian 2005: 20.
33 Hocquenghem 1993: 94.

heterosexual one. Even if he has capabilities and talent, his relations and sociability do not connect in an acceptable and proper way to sex, family, desire, and consumption. Therefore, he is charged of inauthenticity and inappropriateness. He is an underachiever, therefore he is deemed a fool. He cannot be painted black and white, but is shady: like failure, like queer. Instead of refusing unbeing and unbecoming, he inhabits the darkness, works with failure rather than against it. Anupam is epistemologically bound to negativity, to nonsense, to anti-production, and to unintelligibility, as if he were a literary representation of the queer subject analyzed by Heather Love. He initially fights this characterization, trying to bring queerness into recognition, but finally he embraces the negativity that he structurally represents. His life story is an experience of hurt and exclusion. He treads on the path of the failed and the miserable, in darkness: he cannot be part of the India Shining.

Anupam's affective archive is full of different forms of negativity. On one side he shows the 'canonical' gay queer negativity, the 'no future' mantra expressed through "fatigue, ennui, boredom, indifference, ironic distancing, indirectness, arch dismissal, insincerity, and camp"[34]; on the other hand, he also shows a kind of violence that is linked to a different form of negativity, connected to another archive full of "rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, overinvestment, incivility, brutal honesty, and disappointment"[35]. Anupam's behavior is politically incorrect, he turns away from the comfort zone of polite exchange and his negativity promises to be loud, to breed resentment, to be unruly, to make a mess, to disrupt, to shock, and annihilate: in one word, to fail.

Anupam's objective correlative is the cactus, an image of resistance in a sterile environment. Anupam's mother house is surrounded by many kinds of cactus, that "look like dead birds", as if it was a waste land, abandoned by its inhabitants, who left one day leaving everything as it was, and disappeared. Cactus is never a reminder of water and wind, it is never a sign of fertility, but gives a feeling of being a sign of the vicinity of the desert [10]. It has the function of exposing the limit of optimism and its realization. Anupam is fond of cactuses as "they know how to live also in bad weather. Their evolution, blossom, growth is so slow that it takes patience to see them. They are not flamboyant like any tropical plant" [125]. In the old house, "unattended cactuses, with no adornment, were all around, incomprehensibly lost in their beauty, in their identity. They were not in their wild form, nor anybody took care of them" [124–125].

34 Halberstam 2011: 110.

35 Halberstam 2011: 110.

Failing means 'no future'[36]. Queerness does not propel itself forward in time and space through the undoubtedly positive image of the child, following the political imagination of heteronormativity; nor does it project itself back on the past through the solemn image of the parent. Anupam loses quietly. He loses his love, his job, his life. But in losing he imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being, allowing for the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. The last postcard he sends to Vikram quotes in Hindi translation the conclusion of Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*:

> Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole. [119]

The queer protagonist of *Paṃkhvālī nāv*, with his characterization as a misfit, a failure, embodies a negative agenda. He leaves behind any project for re-production. He does not search for ways around death and disappointment, but follows his path to death celebrating in posh places, embracing the absurd and the silly. Even his death – he is found drowned in a swimming pool in the Goa, clumsily wearing an underwear and socks [127] – is hopelessly goofy, completing the gamut of queer lack of success.

Paṃkaj Biṣṭ's novel is an assertion of heteronormativity, and queer protagonist Anupam's failure is a very predictable feature in the framework of modern Indian hegemonic gender constructs. Yet, for the reader it is possible to interpreted this character's anti-social, apolitical agenda as an anti-rational and anti-organizational strategy contesting power, although it is not, of course, a well-formulated critique. This agenda of Anupam is somewhat nihilistic, yet it dissociates itself from nihilism's historical complacency with sexism.

Contemporary queer movements have multiple genealogies: some of them overlap with other radical projects and alternative politics, others have the nihilistic posturing of those that are too-queer-for-everything, being interested in a purely aestheticized attitude that may agree with politics of decency, racialized projects and masculinist enterprises. In between, though, there are many shades and variations.

36 Edelman 2004.

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